

Reverend David Usher's sermon from December 14, 2014.

Still no vacancy?

Though she is now in her mid fifties, my English friend, Susie, is very, very blonde. When she was in her twenties apparently she was even more so, which meant that when she was backpacking alone around Egypt she very definitely stood out. As often happens when travelling that way, one time she was given the address of a friend of a friend in a town that Susie wanted to go to, and so when she was in that town, she fetched out the crumpled piece of paper on which she had written the address and went in search. Finally she found the place, and knocked on the door. The gentleman who answered was understandably startled to see an attractive young English woman at his front door. Susie spoke no more than a few rudimentary words in Egyptian. Happily his English was better but far from fluent, but somehow they managed to communicate with each other about who she was and why she was there and she was graciously welcomed into the home. There she spent a most wonderful day. The whole family treated her as an honoured guest. She was given delicious food to eat. They communicated falteringly in either English or Egyptian, but much more with smiles and gestures. She was shown family photographs and other treasures. Finally, it was time for her to go, and as they were saying their farewells, it suddenly became apparent that, after this wonderful

day of the most gracious hospitality, Susie had knocked on the wrong door. Her host was not the friend of the friend of the friend she had thought he was! Embarrassed, she began to apologise profusely for her mistake, but the man silenced her. “You have been a gift to us” he said. “I give thanks that Allah sent you to us.”

You see, in Egypt, and in so many countries and cultures and particularly in that part of the world which have inherited the Abrahamic faiths, offering hospitality to the stranger is not only a social virtue, it is a paramount religious obligation. There is hardly a greater moral sin than to turn one’s back on those who are in need. Which is not, of course, to say that the practitioners of those faiths are always perfect in the execution of that religious obligation, but being kind and welcoming to the stranger, the guest, the obligations of hospitality are indeed writ large. Different cultures have different standards and expectations about what hospitality means. I once had my own somewhat similar experience. I was an overnight guest once in Latvia, staying in a run-down apartment which had been built as barracks for the occupying Russian military. The Ritz it was not. Anyway, I knew my hosts had little, so I had brought all kinds of treats as house gifts. Chocolate, salami, sweets for the young daughter. Come breakfast, what was served but the very gifts I had brought. My hosts insisted, insisted, that they were not hungry, and that I, as their guest, should eat the very

things I had given them. Miserably and guiltily I did so, realising that the reason they had served these things was because they were the only food they had in the house. It really was, FHB. Family Hold Back. I have also had the reverse experience. A house guest from Uganda who obviously expected that, as his host, I was basically his servant. “Get me a coffee” he would command and I would meekly obey. He was cold, so I lent him a sweater. He obviously thought it was a gift. I never got it back.

Which brings us to the story of Lot, as told in the Book of Genesis. I apologise for choosing that reading. I am sure you get it several times a year and are weary of hearing it. We all know what it is about, don't we? We all know about the grievous sin of the Sodomites. It is the standard text trotted out as proof of God's intractable condemnation of homosexuality, even to the point of God destroying the whole city because of it. The men of Sodom wanted to “know” the two strangers who were sheltering in Lot's house. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink. “Know” in the Biblical sense, get it? To have intercourse with them. They were so inflamed by their carnal and unnatural lusts that all the menfolk of the city swarmed to the house to rape these two strangers. How wicked! They deserved their destruction.

Except, of course, and rather inconveniently, the story has nothing whatever to do with homosexuality. Repeat. Nothing. What was the sin of the men of Sodom? Not homosexuality, but inhospitality to the stranger. The story again. The two angels come to the town's gate in the evening, no doubt hot and tired from their day's travel. Lot sees them, and is moved to offer them lodging. Why? Because it is what you do for the weary stranger. Lot is a righteous and devout man, evidently one of the few in the city, and this is what you do not as a social nicety but a religious necessity. The townsmen flout that religious rule. They surround the house as a rowdy mob, demanding that Lot bring these foreigners out so that they could interrogate them, to have intercourse with them. I.e., aggressively question them. Stop and search. Demand to see their papers. We have our modern equivalents.

So against the obligations of hospitality would it be for Lot to release the two guests to the will of the lynch mob, that he even offers his young daughters to them as an alternative. Now, that seems pretty awful to us today. But remember, girls then were the property of their fathers. The law allowed fathers to do with their daughters whatever they liked. More importantly, the point to focus on here is that Lot was more willing to sacrifice his daughters than breach the sacred religious code of hospitality. The story of Sodom has nothing to do with the condemnation of homosexuality. It is a story condemning inhospitality

to the stranger, the other. How tragically ironic it is that those who use it as the standard text for their homophobia, their hatred of those who are different, are committing the very sin of the Sodomites. Would it not be nice if those who are most eager to quote the Bible as the scriptural justification for their hatreds, would actually understand what it was about?

The lesson to be learned from this is that, in all the Abrahamic faith traditions there is the strongest possible imperative to show kindness to the stranger. This is true of Islam, and it is true Christianity. Much more important than shouting out from the rooftops how much you love God, much more important than such self-righteousness displays, of crying out Lord, Lord, is how you treat the foreigner, the stranger, the hungry, the dispossessed and the imprisoned. The Other. Do you doubt it? Let me refer you to these paraphrased verses from Matthew's gospel, chapter 25.

“The Son of Man will separate men into two groups, the sheep and the goats on the right and the left. To those on the right he will say, “Blessings upon you, come and enter the kingdom. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me into your home; when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help; when in prison you visited

me. Those on the right ask when they did all of these things to the Son of Man, to which is the answer “I tell you this, anything you did for one of my brothers, however humble, you did for me”. Then to those on the left he says, “The curse be upon you, go from my sight. Go to hell. For when I was hungry you gave me nothing to eat; when thirsty nothing to drink; when I was a stranger you gave me no home; when naked you did not clothe me; when I was ill and in prison you did not come to my help.” They protest: when did we not do any of these things for you? To which he replies “I tell you this, anything you did not do for of these, however humble, you did not do for me.”

Sad, is it not, that it is often those who most vociferously invoke the name of Jesus at every turn, who self-righteously claim to be saved and bound for heaven as their reward, are often also those who most vociferously vilify the foreigner, the stranger, the poor, the incarcerated, the other. Who use the name of Jesus, a messenger of love, to justify their hates. I know I do not live up to my own professed ideals. But I hope my hypocrisies are not so glaringly distasteful, or so cruel to others.

When we re-tell the Christmas story of Jesus’ nativity, with Mary and Joseph making their weary way to Bethlehem, arriving at night to find the town crowded with travellers and no inn able to accommodate them,

perhaps it conjures a mental image of a strip of motels on the road into town, each of them flashing their No Vacancy sign. But what if we reshape the story, so it is not just that the inns are full and unable to offer a room; what if a better way to interpret the story is that it is the whole town that shuns them, does not offer hospitality, the whole town turns its back, even on the near-to-term Mary, the whole town is indifferent to the plight of the desperate young couple. We are housed, we are warm, we are comfortable, they all say. What interest have we in the well-being of these people we do not know? Who cares?

I am currently re-reading John Steinbeck's powerful classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel I first read as a teenager in high school. I thought, now I am here in California, I should reacquaint myself with that chapter of this state's history. Not one of the more glorious chapters, as I am sure you know. The Joads arrive from Oklahoma, having been turned off their land by drought and the merciless banks. They come in the hope of finding work, and are greeted with hatred, scorn and fear. They are met by armed deputies who harass and move them on, who treat them as scum, less than human. Steinbeck's novel is a raging indictment of the cruel inhospitality of those who had arrived in California just a generation or so before and who now have property and power. Who deliberately destroy crops rather than let starving children eat them; who exploit the desperation of others for their own profit and to protect their

own. Steinbeck exposes the harsh truth that, the more people have, the more they are fearful of losing it, the more ruthless they are in protecting it. Those who have nothing, share what little they have. Those who have much, hoard it unto themselves.

In Steinbeck's story of almost a century ago, it was people out of state who were the other. Okies. Fellow American citizens, but despised nonetheless. Today, it is those from south of the border who come desperate for work, hungry, afraid, impoverished, but who are shunned, imprisoned, treated as criminals, as less than human. And lest you think I am picking on the shame that is American immigration policy, I regret to inform you that the immigration policies of the present government of my native Australia are so outrageous that they are in breach of all international human rights treaties. And this, with a Prime Minister who almost became a Catholic priest, and who touts his Christian credentials at every opportunity.

What if the real point of the story of Mary and Joseph coming to Bethlehem as strangers and not being welcomed is not about cosmological miracles, but that God is to be found in the very person we would least expect. The child born in poverty, cast out from the warmth of human society to be among animals. The two men in the story of Lot and Sodom were angels. The popular image of angels is that they are



ephemeral creatures flitting about with wings, but angels are messengers of God. Inognito. In disguise. And often that disguise is in a form we would least expect.

As the poster says. You want to keep the Christ in Christmas? Then feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Welcome the stranger. Visit the sick and the incarcerated. As we treat the very least amongst us, so are we treating God. And so shall we be judged.